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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how online communities provide space for educational leaders to reflect on and share the affective side of leadership, discussing implications of online communities in leadership and relating it to Wenger's concept of a community of practice. Using research conducted at the United Kingdom's Open University, the paper argues for the use of online conferences as part of headteacher support and development. It examines influencing factors in such an online conference facility, the role of group interaction and participation, and the role of moderators in leadership discussions. The University's Leadership Programme for Serving Headteachers included an information communication technology component. Participants had access to a dedicated Website and conference facility. The study examined use of and attitudes toward online conferencing. Data collection involved technical records generated by the University's servers, telephone surveys, online surveys, and an online conference. Respondents appreciated the ability to maintain contact with other course participants. Headteachers liked being able to conference at their convenience with people who experienced similar issues. They considered the conferencing easy to use and useful. Most respondents logged onto the site weekly (generally from home in the evening). The conference moderator helped facilitate personal learning. (Contains 12 references.) (SM)

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# KING JOHN'S CHRISTMAS:

# DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP COMMUNITIES ON-LINE

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## Introduction

**"King John was not a good man,**
**He had his little ways,**
**And sometimes no-one spoke to him,**
**For days and days and days"**

**A A Milne**

King John learnt the hard way in A A Milne's poem that leaders can be isolated from those they lead, and that this can be a lonely place to be. This paper looks at how the concept of an online community can provide space for educational leaders not only to reflect, but also to share the affective side of leadership. As Brian Caldwell stated recently, "Schools are increasingly looking to global best practice and the 'virtual learning community' for inspiration and support." (Caldwell, 2001). Here, we will look at the implications for the use of on-line communities in leadership, and discuss how this can be related to Wenger's concept of a community of practice. Drawing on research carried out at The Open University in the United Kingdom, the paper will bring forward arguments for the use of such conferences as part of headteacher support and development, in particular at supporting leaders both socially and emotionally. In particular, it will look at the influencing factors in such an on-line conferencing facility, the part played by group interaction and participation, and the distinctive role of moderation in such leadership discussions.

Gilly Salmon (Salmon, 2001b) suggests the possibility that the critical question we should ask is not "what does technology do?" but "how can we cause learning to happen with the technology as a mediator? She argues that as concepts of space and time are changing, so are our ideas of how and with whom we can collaborate. To this author, online conferencing is all about community - creating new social forms at a time where communities everywhere are being eroded. Richard Farson (Farson, 1997) argues that you can have deep, warm personal relationships electronically in this medium. This paper will argue that these forms of discussion are organisationally, socially and intellectually challenging, and begin to discuss a developing conceptual framework.

It does this by using an evaluation of the Leadership Programme for Serving Heads (LPSH), the author's work on the affective side of leadership, and the work of Gilly Salmon on online moderation as a stimulus. The paper aims to begin to shape our thinking about the ways in which school leaders can be supported through online conferencing, and how such

discussions could play a key part in encouraging and sustaining leadership in schools. It also highlights the need for more research into this area.

The discussion will be shaped around the following questions:

- Why do educational leaders use online conferencing?
- What is it about working and learning online that changes the learning environment and the experience for those that take part?
- What is the role of the facilitator/moderator in working and learning online?
- What are the implications for leadership of using e-learning environments?

## CONTEXT OF THE RESEARCH

Developed by the Teacher Training Agency (TTA) in partnership with Hay/McBer Management Consultants, and in association with the National Association of Headteachers and the Open University (OU), the Leadership Programme for Serving Headteachers (LPSH) became nationally available in the United Kingdom in November 1998. The OU has supported the Information Communication Technology (ICT) component of the programme since that time. Overall responsibility for the LPSH passed from the TTA to the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) in June 1999.

The programme is aimed at all serving headteachers in England and Wales and has four key elements: pre-workshop preparation; a four-day residential workshop; post-workshop support; and a follow up day. During the residential workshop it was intended that trainers introduce the dedicated LPSH website. This was developed and managed by the Open University, and incorporated a range of features including:

- a conferencing facility which enables participants to share ideas and expertise;
- a 'Good Ideas' database submitted by headteachers;
- resources providing guidance on analysing school performance data and target setting; and
- SWISH – (Selected Websites Indexed for Serving Headteachers) providing an A to Z index of websites covering management, education and professional topics.

This paper will concentrate on the online conferencing part of the ICT component.

Each LPSH workshop was given a conference facility, using FirstClass conferencing software in its web access format, so that in theory participants can keep in touch electronically after the residential element of their programme. Where appropriate they were moderated by colleagues with experience at a senior level in the field. Access to all conference areas was controlled centrally and each LPSH participant was given a unique user name and password. A published code of practice set out the etiquette for all online conferencing.

Up to January 2001, 5,388 people had been given user names and passwords entitling them to full LPSH website access. 38% of the entire LPSH population, 2,067 people, has logged on since January 2000. 36% had never logged on by password, though this figure does include a small number who had yet to attend their LPSH workshop; a further 26% had not logged on this calendar year.

From January to September 2000, there were 63,338 successful hits for the entire LPSH website. The number of sessions peaked in March and dropped to there lowest in August, when most schools are on vacation. If the August figure is discounted, the average figure per month is 7,659 hits. Extrapolated across the year these figures suggest over 85,000. However, care is required in extrapolating figures because the number of LPSH workshops can vary from month to month.

The programme itself did not insist upon participants using or demonstrating a competence in Information and Communication Technology. It was for participants to choose whether to use the ICT component, they neither were neither contracted to do so nor provided with the necessary ICT equipment. A subsequent pilot project centred at the DFEE, "Talking Heads" using Think.com software, provided participants with a laptop and insisted upon regular logging in as a component of participation.

**METHOD**

For the evaluation, a variety of research instruments and techniques were used and both quantitative and qualitative evidence was collected. This created a mixed method study. (Caracelli and Greene, 1993). The sources included technical records from the OU servers, a telephone survey, an online questionnaire, and a specific on-line conference. Technical records generated by the OU servers provided a range of valuable background material. The telephone survey was conducted in late November, 2000. Four separate categories of

participant were targeted and seventy-two successful interviews conducted. The four participant categories were as follows and the bracketed figure shows the number interviewed:

- the most active users in October 2000 (24);
- occasional users (6);
- non-users who went to a workshop in June and July 2000 (21);
- participants from two parallel LPSH workshops in January 2000 (21).

Separate but linked question sheets were designed for each category, all four providing quantitative and qualitative data. The questionnaire was first made available as a downloadable file and subsequently as a document that could be completed 'live' online. It was designed to elicit information about:

- respondents and the schools they work in;
- their use of the LPSH website;
- their views on the current LPSH website;
- their views as to how it should develop.

Questions in the first two areas were primarily designed to yield quantitative objective data; those in the remaining areas to provide opportunities for qualitative judgements. Additionally, once the initial findings were analysed, an on-line, moderated conference was set up, drawn from a random sample of participants who logged on regularly. This offered a forum to discuss and interpret the questionnaire results, as well as an opportunity to probe further into the answers.

## FINDINGS

### Telephone Survey

The seventy-two respondents to the telephone survey were almost evenly divided by gender. Exactly half were heads of primary schools and just over three-quarters worked with children in Key Stage 1 and/or 2. Fifty-seven respondents had served as a headteacher for six or more years, and thirty-five ten years' experience.

In the survey, active and occasional users of the LPSH website were invited to make qualitative judgements about it. Of the thirty active and occasional users of the LPSH website surveyed, twenty-six regarded the conference facility as its most useful feature. The ability to keep in touch with course participants was also mentioned several times and clearly, for many, conferencing was the key strength. Both groups were also asked to indicate their strength of feeling in relation to a series of statements about the LPSH conferencing facility. Using a five-point scale they were able to express opinions from strong agreement (5) to strong disagreement (1). Taken together, active and occasional users believed that the conferencing was easy to use (mean score 4.1) and promoted useful discussion (mean score 4.0). They also thought, though with less strength, that the conference facility was relevant to their needs (mean score 3.7), reduces their isolation (mean score 3.5) and enabled them to get rapid responses (3.3). Active users were slightly more certain that it was easy to use and promoted useful discussion; occasional users that it reduced their isolation.

Headteachers felt that not enough people use the conferencing facility. The reason for this given in the responses was often believed to rest within the LPSH training, and is outside the remit of this paper. However, we will return below to the discussion of the importance or otherwise of numbers of participants in conferencing.

Non-users were also asked about their reasons for not subsequently logging onto the website. When offered a list of five possible reasons just over half said they had too little time to do so and, in setting out other relevant factors, several more pointed to other priorities, including preparing for an OFSTED visit and inspecting a leaking roof. None of the respondents identified a lack of ICT skills as an issue, though four touched on a lack of suitable ICT equipment and one reported not being able to gain access despite trying. Whilst a small number were not sure about the website's relevance and felt that they needed some sort of stimulus, just one person did not like the content. Although no one reported lost passwords as a factor preventing them from using the website, two-thirds of those contacted asked to be sent access details in one form or another.

As well as targeting groups of headteachers by their usage of the website, a sample was taken of two workshops picked at random. These two groups contained twenty-four participants and all but three could be contacted for the telephone survey. Over two thirds of the respondents were female; exactly two thirds were headteachers at schools involved with Key Stage 1 and/or Key Stage 2; and all bar two had served at least six years as a headteacher.

Sixteen of these headteachers said that they had had the opportunity to look at the website on their LPSH workshop. However, of these, three commented to their disappointment that they had only done so briefly and two noted that there had been significant problems with the computers. Furthermore, the two headteachers who said they had not had the opportunity to look at the website during the workshop explained that this was due to difficulty logging on and the tutor's inability to overcome the problems. Seven headteachers said that they have had subsequent opportunities to explore the website, but of these only three felt able express views on it. The fourteen who had not logged on responded to a list of factors and were given the chance to include others. Eleven (and therefore half of the entire group actually sampled) said they had too little time and several more reported other priorities. Five noted lack of suitable ICT skills or equipment and two said that they had tried but been unable to get on site. Whilst only two had lost their passwords, ten asked to be sent their access details again. Just three of the entire sample had gone on to become more regular users. Where they expressed preferences and exercised clear judgements this small group felt conferencing to be the most useful feature.

One headteacher expressed concern about conferencing (in general) being used as a chat line instead of a business tool, whilst another had suspicions about the web and what happened to comments once people had expressed them. This may be a personal opinion reflecting a normative view on how communication between professionals should be structured. However, there was frequently recognition that the website could be a means of keeping in touch and exchanging ideas, as well as providing links to other sites and resources. It may well be that one person spoke for many when arguing that if every headteacher were provided with a laptop more use would be made of the site.

**Online Questionnaire**

Although the online questionnaire was a very small sample the results obtained were very detailed. Most all of the twelve respondents to the online questionnaire were headteachers working in the primary sector, mostly in community and voluntary aided schools. Five were in their first headship and eight had served for over ten years as a headteacher. School size varied from 93 to 513 pupils and nearly all were within five miles of an institution similar in status, type and the number on roll. In analysing respondents' use of the LPSH website, nearly all logged on from home in the evening, even though they could take advantage of confidential access at school if they wished. Most logged on at least weekly, but three visited

the site monthly and one person just once a term. The length of user sessions was rarely less than ten minutes or over one hour. Ten headteachers use the website during school vacations. Conferencing was the most frequently accessed area; it was also regarded as the most useful.

Respondents were invited to comment on the strengths and weaknesses of the conferencing facility. Keeping in touch with former course participants and the ability to share and discuss ideas were frequently noted strengths. One headteacher described it as:

'*a rare opportunity to share thoughts and concerns with colleagues across the country*'.

Another valued the opportunity to:

'*break away from the local culture*'.

For one person the opportunity to get a rapid response to issues of concern or interest was important. '*Comprehensive debate*' was mentioned and the site was described as:
'*a valuable opportunity for the exchange of ideas*'
with real potential. More generally, other respondents noted that it was easy to use, getting broader and covering more issues. It was '*an excellent resource*' in which the main strength was the '*support structure*'. These thoughts were taken up further in the Online Conference about the initial research.

## Why do educational leaders use online conferencing?

### The Online Conference

The online conference discussion was set up after the original research took place. Its aim was to focus more specifically on why Headteachers who used the conferencing frequently did so, and what were the barriers, if any, for them in building up an effective online community. The strongest reason for using it was summed up by a participant:

*"As heads, we have relatively few people with whom we can traditionally confer on an emotional level and more generally, conferencing does provide opportunities for informed discussion."*

Another wrote:

*"This form of communication fits in with my time schedule. I can use it whenever I have time."*

There was an interesting catch 22 that began to emerge from the comments. Those who use the conferencing said that it fitted in with their time schedule, and was a welcome treat in a school day:

*" If I'm word processing some document or other for school or governors or church, it's a welcome diversion to pop into LPSH,"*

Less active users, as reported above, were more likely to make comments focussing on lack of time such as:

*"I wish I had more time to use it. It could do with being bigger and quicker so that people like me, when I am busy and need it most, can get on line quickly "*

This strongly suggest, as one participant pointed out, that *"time and tradition influence our use."*

A strong feeling to emerge at the start of the debate was, as in any social arena, people feel more comfortable when social conventions that would apply in face to face discussion, are observed:

*"People need a bridge into electronic communications."*
*"We feel more comfortable if there has been some sort of introduction."*
*"There is the opportunity for one to one engagement, but at a level of intimacy that is less than that face to face. It is in some ways less spontaneous than speech and may appeal to those who prefer writing to talking."*

This replicates other studies of online forums eg.(Anderson and Kanuka, 1997). They suggested that professional discourse needs to develop new social skills to cope with socialising electronically. Others (Rafaeli and Sudweeks, 1997) suggest that face to face communication should not be used as a standard of comparison because:

*"Fully interactive communication requires that later messages in any sequence be taken into account, not just messages that preceded them, but also the manner in which previous messages were reactive"*

Newcomers to conferencing reported a sense of moving into an established group:

*"It felt strange contributing to something when you didn't know any of the other names. In fact for a while I just read everyone's contributions. I felt as if they must all know each other personally from the way the contributions read."*

This emphases how a feeling of "knowing others" can develop, despite the lack of physical or verbal clues. In some ways it is akin to the art of nineteenth century letter writing, but with more opportunities to interact with the ongoing community commentary. The Headteachers comments echo those comments reported by Brenda Beatty (Beatty, 2000). Beatty's study of the emotions of leadership online is one of the fullest currently available. In her exploration she states that the educational leaders that took part commented:

*"Their enjoyment of the process of sharing real feelings, is itself an important finding. This experience has been described variously as follows: "compelling," " a real high," " I really enjoy reading this stuff," "I feel this dialogue has provided both personal and professional growth,"*

> *I've dashed home between school and a governors' meeting, and checked my e-mail. And then thought that I should write back to say how uplifting this has been. Yes it is a bind sometimes, but never once I get started. . .. I think you may have been providing more of a service to us than you think(....) "I've found the input from other people almost unanimously fascinating and uplifting and don't want to 'drop out.'*

These comments and the replication in this research suggests that on-line conferencing for Headteachers actually taps into the affective, emotional side of leadership, rather than being a "professional" discussion arena. The topics e.g. stress, bereavement, difficult colleagues, that participants have themselves suggested over the time period of the research suggest strongly that this is the case.

**What is it about working and learning online that changes the learning environment and the experience for those that take part?**

*"Some conferences possess an energy that encourages active participation, whilst others, apparently designed to facilitate discussion of equally relevant and interesting topics, seem to spit and splutter, with minor flurries of activity and little of value to offer the participant"* **(Brochet, 1989)**

The ICT component of LPSH was predicated on the assumption that the implementation of networked technology to online conferencing would be easy, and require little extra from the

trainers, if the headteachers had access to the appropriate equipment. Somehow, they would both know how to use it, and what its value to them was as leaders. This has not been the case. Very quickly, the leaders using the site moved the discussions away from the initial workshop stimulus to issues of daily concern. Providing the facility was not enough, community had to be nurtured and developed. This research has shown that those who take up the opportunity of conferencing, and use it regularly, find it very valuable. It not only feeds in to their daily lives as Headteachers, but also enables them to share emotions about the dynamics of working in schools. There have been major pressures in England over the last few years, coupled with increased and increasing accountability to Central Government. Conferencing has provided opportunities for them both to acquire knowledge from a professional community and also develop shared meanings as the group learning processes have been developed. The benefits they have felt are derived from the paradox described by **Beatty (ibid, p15):**

*"The paradox of emotion and educational leadership, is the dichotomy between the way leaders, and teachers, believe they are required to seem, and the way, as highly functioning, multi-dimensional human beings, they need to be. In order to accomplish the emotional labour of being emotionally controlled in difficult, threatening and angering situations, the emotions may become subverted to the cause. Even so, deep emotional understanding requires access to what oneself and others are really feeling, something that has been professionally hidden in the traditional models of teaching and leading".*

**(Beatty ibid, p15.)**

Gradually, a community of practice had developed. The research shows it to be built to help manage the multi-dimensions of leadership. Building such a community of practice through the medium of online conferencing has meant that participants can explore aspects of leadership within a safe virtual "space". As Wenger argues:

*"Because learning transforms who we are and what we can do, it is an experience of identity. It is not just an accumulation of skills and information, but a process of becoming."*
**.(Wenger, 1999, p.219)**

Identity for him is about deep connections with other through shared histories and experiences, reciprocity, affection and mutual commitment.(Wenger, 2000). All of these have been seen in the LPSH conferences. To engage with the community across various levels, because so many became involved,it has been necessary to structure it in layers.

Wenger suggests that this layering into a fractal structure means that you can belong to your own subcommunity and experience in a local and direct way your belonging to a much broader community (Wenger, ibid., p243). This can be further illustrated by using Wenger's three elements of community as identifiers.

1. Members are held together by their collective understanding of what their community is about …(they) hold each other accountable to this sense of joint enterprise.

2. Members build their community through mutual engagement. They interact with each other, establishing norms and relationships of mutuality that reflect these interactions.

3. Communities of practice produce a shared repertoire of communal resources – language routines, stories, styles, etc. To be competent is to have access to this repertoire and be able to access it appropriately.
   **(Wenger, ibid, p229).**

For newcomers to become full members of the community, they must gain new positions in the economy of meaning. With new leaders entering the conference at various times, the role of the facilitator, or e-moderator, in online conferencing is, this paper argues, crucial

**What is the role of the facilitator/moderator in working and learning online?**

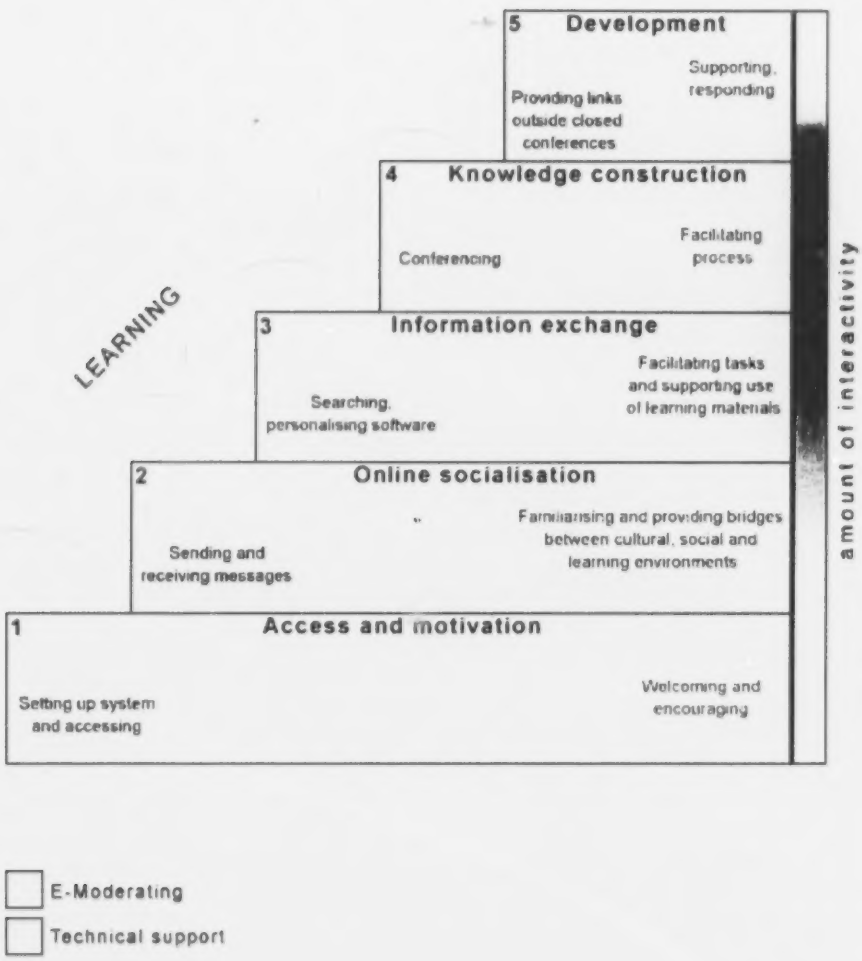
"The needles on the knitting"

There is a growing literature on the role of e-moderator in learning online, and on the competences that are required to be successful, both for moderators and participants:

*"Successful online learning depends on teachers and trainers acquiring new competencies, on their becoming aware of its potential and on their inspiring the learners, rather than on merely mastering the technology. In practice, networked applications should reflect the needs of teachers and learners (rather than the other way round!). Providers of online learning platforms are keen to respond to these needs, but currently, most teachers do not know enough about online learning to be able to articulate their needs effectively."*
**(Salmon, 2001a)**

Salmon has been at the forefront of work in the UK in this area. She describes a five-stage model of moderation.

**Modelling Teaching and Learning Online**
**(Salmon ibid, p.26)**




This conceptualisation is very relevant to the LPSH conferencing, but with some significant differences. In the Salmon model, the participants go through certain defined stages as the online learning progresses. At stage one, individual access and the ability of participants to use the online learning platform are essential prerequisites for conference participation. The next stage involves individual participants establishing their online identities and then finding others with whom to interact. At stage three, participants give information relevant to the course to each other. At stage four, course-related group discussions occur and the interaction becomes more collaborative. The communication depends on the establishment of common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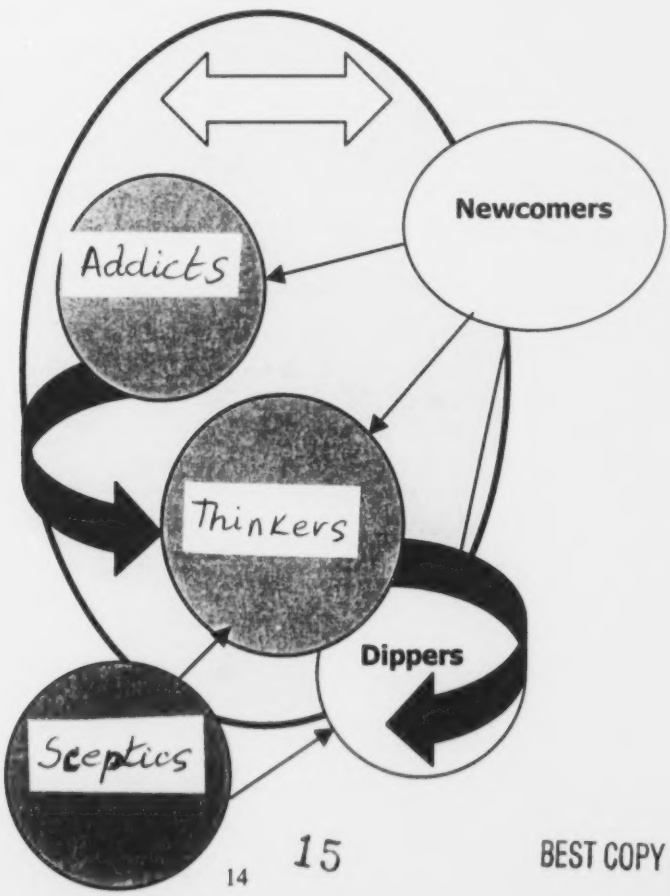
understandings. At stage five, participants look for more benefits from the system to help them achieve personal goals, explore how to integrate online learning into other forms of learning and reflect on the learning processes.

Salmon also describes (p112-113) three types of conference participant – swimmers (participants who can plunge right in), wavers (need quite a bit of help to get started, and often feel there is too little time) and drowners (find it very difficult to log on, and have little motivation to succeed). These evocative names sum up for this author some of the research findings. However, with the LPSH conferencing, there was no explicit course content to moderate. Explorations of issues chosen by the participants were the means that the moderators used to build community, and the participants built their online identities over time. Thus it seemed pertinent here to develop these models for a non-content based professional online conference, and match them to the research. It would seem that the LPSH conferencing was more fluid and organic than that described above, and the participants, although similar to swimmers, wavers and drowners, differed in several ways. I have called them addicts, newcomers, thinkers, sceptics and dippers.

## Community Membership



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By definition, everyone is a **Newcomer** at some stage! However, some Heads never moved passed this stage into the community proper. **Addicts**, like Salmon's swimmers, tend to be confident with ICT and able to integrate quickly into a known community. Their motivation may be quite altruistic in that they are willing to spend time in cyberspace with other professionals sharing both the day to day minutiae, as well as more profound issues. **Thinkers** may eventually become addicts, but the research had many examples of Heads who preferred to stay in this group:

*"I get support just reading the conversations."*

This is a more user-friendly title than that of a "lurker", but may well be seen in the same way as a pragmatic approach to information gathering. **Sceptics** are newcomers who have often been subjected to some sort of technological breakdown on the way to using conferencing, of which the following quote is typical:

*"Recently had trouble logging on. Not been able to log on so not bothered"*

They may also be concerned about the audience for their comments, or having not interacted themselves with others significantly, may treat the whole idea dismissively as "chat". **Dippers,** on the other hand, tend to be less altruistic then other users, and will only really become involved when they need some sort of response urgently from other leader. This is neatly summed up in the following comment:

*"On tap there are other educational professionals"*

The diagram above attempts to explain the fluidity of this framework. Because the software used (FirstClass) gives the participant an *overview* on his/her screen of the whole conferencing arena, and access to the history of messages, they can feel a part of the whole process. This is more difficult to achieve in other conferencing systems where the pages displayed are very individualised. However, it also means that for those who choose not to participate fully, or become sceptics, they are unable to get a sense of what taking part and being part of a community actually means. The one this paper uses is that of Wenger:

*"A community of practice is a living context that can give newcomers access to competence and also invite a personal experience of engagement by which to incorporate that competence into an identity of participation.."*
**(Wenger, 1999, p.214)**

Effective facilitation engages participants in this living context and adds and fosters the personal experience of engagement. The research shown that this type of moderation by other leaders and professionals was clearly value and part of the reason that they felt a part of the community. It also reinforced the idea that this sort of activity was a professional one to engage in:

*"The facilitator keeps the conversation going. They wind up if the topic is waning and bring forward other ideas. A bit like the needles on the knitting they're holding onto the threads."*

*"The facilitator is absolutely indispensable. There needs to be somebody "who knows" and who has a role as leader to take participants gently into the community and make them feel welcome - part of the community. They need to be obviously keen on the system and dedicated to making it work. An enthusiast."*

*"The facilitator provides continuity, encouragement and a sense of mediation/legitimisation i.e. a sort of independent guarantor that the site is bona fide and therefore 'proper'.*

Through the facilitator, personal learning could take place.

**The implications for leadership of using e-learning environments**

**A conclusion**

> *"Leadership has its highs and lows, its successes and failures. Principals cry, laugh, dream and become suspicious."*
> **(Loader, 1997, p.3)**

Loader's book on the 'inner' principal conveys to the reader the affective side of leadership. He shares, through the use of metaphor the emotional journey that is leadership in schools today. Similarly, the main outcome of this research is a realisation by school leaders that they need support, affirmation and direction in their leadership, and that a significantly useful way of providing this is on-line.

The e-learning environment that was created in this particular research example was not, in the end, to do with discussions of models of leadership effectiveness, as may have been envisaged by the programme's originators. Instead, the climate created was one that enabled leaders to begin to explore some of the personal and emotional issues that impacted on their leadership, as well as giving access to a professional community with ready solutions for day to day management problems. The challenge in terms of community growth is both to extend

the number of participants, whilst still retaining quality facilitation to enable people to feel valued, and also to add more specific professional development opportunities to the e-learning environment. The proliferation of such on-line communities also means that research needs to be carried on to find out what works best, and how aspects of community on-line can be effectively assessed.

Perhaps King John's Christmas would not have been such a lonely feast if he had been able to access support on-line?

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Website address: http://www2.open.ac.uk/heads

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